

# A Study of the Japanese Diaspora in Peru



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*Peru is a Spanish-speaking country that is known for its large population of ethnic Japanese, or Nikkei Peruvians. Japan has also many Peruvians. The author conducted a survey in the two famous Nikkei schools in Lima in order to shed light on how Japanese linguistic culture is transmitted in school education. These case studies confirmed that the schools were trying to transmit the Japanese ethos by such means as teaching the way Japanese people greet one another. The author also revealed that even in Peru's key Nikkei schools, English teaching is prioritized over Japanese teaching. Moreover, it was revealed that non-Nikkei Peruvians play the important role in transmitting the Japanese language and culture in Peru.*

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The South American state of Peru is a Spanish-speaking country that, alongside Brazil, is known for its large population of ethnic Japanese, or Nikkei Peruvians. In this article, Nikkei Peruvians shall refer to people who are Japanese descendants and can trace their roots back to Japan. In order to shed light on the form of Japanese culture that has been handed down through the generations by members of Peruvian society, the author visited educational institutions in the capital city, Lima, in 2011 and 2012 and conducted listening surveys and participant observation there.

Let us first explore how Peru and Japan are deeply related to each other in spite of their considerable geographic distance. Peru was the first South American country that received Japanese immigrants. The first wave of immigration was in 1899, when 790 Japanese made the ocean crossing to Peru. This migration took place nine years before Japanese migration to Brazil. In 1923, the immigration agreement with Peru was abolished. However, family members were still permitted entry, and so immigration continued through “yobiyose” [migration by invitation]. Japanese immigration to Peru differed from Japanese immigration to Brazil in one important aspect. The Japanese in Brazil

were immigrant farmers permitted entry based on an agreement between the two countries of Brazil and Japan, while the immigrants in Peru were contract laborers working on plantations based on an agreement between Japanese emigration companies and Peruvian haciendas. Most of the owners of these haciendas were apparently British.

Since Peru at the time was a place of large-scale farming, one laborer could not be anything more than a laborer or a tenant farmer, and so the Japanese immigrants were unable to make much progress in the agriculture sector, no matter how hard they strove. In response to this situation, the Japanese turned their attention to the commercial sector, where they could carry out activities more freely. However, the concentration of Japanese residents in urban areas prompted anti-Japanese sentiment. In order to avoid being caught up in the wave of anti-Japanese hostility, the Japanese turned their backs on the cities and, with assistance from the Japanese government, set about building a colony east of the Andes. This colony was never successfully established. Nevertheless, Peru stands as an example of Japanese people's overseas migration and commercial success in their new land (Sasaki 1990, 13).



Conversely, there are many Peruvians in Japan today, some of whom are Nikkei Peruvians and their family members. During the recession that followed the 2008 Lehman Brother's Shock, many foreign workers employed in Japan lost their jobs and were forced to return to their native countries. However, a considerable number of Peruvians either remained in Japan or made frequent trips to and from Peru. Looking at the breakdown of registered foreigners in Japan as of 2010, the Chinese have the biggest share at 687,156. In second place are North/South Koreans at 565,989, in third place are Brazilians with 230,552, in fourth place are Filipinos with 210,181; and in fifth place are Peruvians, at 54,636 (Ministry of Justice statistics, released August 19, 2011). The Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, prompted a mass exit of foreigners, but today, in 2014, the sense of crisis has eased, and many have returned to Japan.

### Nikkei Schools in Lima: La Union

The author conducted a survey in the two famous Nikkei schools in Lima, namely La Union and La Victoria, in order to shed light on how Japanese linguistic culture is transmitted in school education while at the same time examining how such culture differs from Peruvian culture and education. The author will also describe the characteristics and recent changes of Nikkei schools.

La Union is a school that exists as an ethnic symbol for the Nikkei community. In this sense, it plays a similar role to that played by the prewar Japanese elementary school in Lima, which was modeled after a Japanese school and used Japanese textbooks. It started out in 1953 as a general sport field. During the postwar years, it was believed that ath-

letics could help raise the morale of the Nikkei community, so the sport field was realized through the donations and voluntary activities of the community. Before the war, the school yard of the Japanese elementary school in Lima served as a venue for sports and other events, but it was requisitioned by the government during the war, and the school no longer had a sport facility. A decision was made to give part of the sport field to a school that would provide secondary education to the Nikkei community, the first such school in Peru, and this was the beginning of La Union (Yamawaki 1999, 26, 27).

La Union was founded in 1971. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Peru was under a military dictatorship. During this time, there was a rush to build schools in cities in order to cope with the expanding demand for secondary education that accompanied the rapid migration of the population from rural areas to cities. Against this backdrop, La Union first opened its doors to 41 students. The school also provided education to the children of migrant workers in search of temporary work (*dekasegi*). Through the listening survey, the author confirmed that La Union is recognized today among Peruvians as an independent Nikkei school that offers both primary and secondary education. Along with other Nikkei schools, such as the *José Gálvez School*, the *Hideyo Noguchi School*, and the *subsequently-discussed La Victoria School*, La Union welcomes general Peruvians in addition to Nikkei students.

Let us now look at the teaching of Japanese culture as revealed in the results of the author's listening survey with the principal and a Japanese language instructor who was employed as a Japanese language coordinator. The interviews were conducted in Spanish to accommodate interviewees' mother tongue, although simple Japanese, such as "dozo" [go ahead] and "sensei" [teacher] were occasionally spoken.

### Proportion of Nikkei Students

In 2011, there were a little under 1,000 students and around 80 teaching staff, including part-time teachers. As for the gender breakdown, the student body was composed of 55 % boys and 45 % girls. During the interview, the school principal provided further information: "Out of the 80 teaching

staff, 20 are Nikkei... Of the ten Japanese language instructors, eight are Nikkei.” The statistic that deserves the most attention is that the proportion of Nikkei students stands at 48 %, meaning that they are not in the majority. This statistic signifies a shift from the situation some years ago when, according to fieldwork by Yamawaki (1999), Nikkei students were in the majority. Since reaching its peak, which according to the principal was “95 %,” the ratio of Nikkei students has been declining each year.

This finding raises the question of why La Union, which is well known as a Nikkei school, has started attracting general Peruvians. In response to this question, the principal claimed that there are three major reasons as to why La Union is being selected: “interest in Japanese culture,” “it is close to home,” and “family members or relatives recommended it.”

Thus, the fact that La Union is a Nikkei school is not the primary reason that parents are selecting the school. The interview also revealed that even a school such as La Union, which exemplifies Nikkei schools in Lima, is not regarded as a school for Nikkei Peruvians, but as a place for learning Japanese culture that welcomes all Peruvians.

## Japanese Language Teaching

In accordance with the system of public education in Peru, there are six years of primary education (*primaria*) followed by five years of secondary education (*secundaria*), and in La Union, Japanese is a compulsory subject for all students. For the first five years of primary education, Japanese lessons take place based on grade; then from the sixth year of primary education and throughout the five years of secondary education, the students are sorted into separate classes based on their Japanese proficiency. There is an obvious difference in proficiency level between the class for students who have recently returned from Japan and the class for students who have few opportunities to use Japanese in their daily lives.

The main textbook used during lessons is “*Minna no Nihongo*” [Japanese for All], a textbook that is widely used in Japan, as well, among students whose first language is not Japanese. Regarding the language that is used in class, while Japanese alone is used in the returnees’ class, in other class-

es a mixture of Japanese and Spanish is used. The principal claimed that the reason for using Spanish instead of Japanese is that “if you only use Japanese, the students will not understand.” Another reason could be that the first language of many of the teachers, despite their being Nikkei Peruvians, is Spanish rather than Japanese. The Japanese instructor who was acting as a coordinator was a young female Nikkei, a fact that was immediately apparent from her name and appearance. However, she said, “Japanese is hardly ever spoken in my family home,” and while she did experience a short stay in Japan, most of her knowledge of the Japanese language and culture came from learning materials in Peru—i.e., “I learned most of it by myself.”

To students who so desire, La Union offers opportunities to study Japanese in Japan through, for example, a two-week long student exchange program that it runs together with an affiliated school in Hokkaido, Japan. Aside from these undertakings, though, there are virtually no situations in Peruvian daily life where Japanese is required. The same is true for many other groups of Nikkei Peruvians. The only exception is when a Nikkei Peruvian with a good command of Japanese speaks to visitors from Japan who cannot understand Spanish.

Given this situation, what is the value in providing Japanese language teaching? In the words of the principal, “The reason why we continue to provide Japanese language teaching is related to our school’s history... the aim is to preserve the values of our Japanese ancestors.” The school’s history is as briefly described above, while the “values” the principal mentions can be equated with the educational goals of La Union. The interview then uncovered the belief that the Japanese ethos can be transmitted through the generations via the mastering of Japanese proficiency: “We place great importance on Japanese language education, because through the Japanese language, the Japanese philosophy of *gaman* [patience] and *ganbaru* [doing your best] can be passed down.”

On the other hand, the author confirmed from the curriculum that there continues to be only three time slots a week allotted to Japanese lessons throughout the primary and secondary years, while English has shifted from five to eight time slots a week. Though it is a Nikkei school, the advance of a U.S.-centered globalization has forced La Union to prioritize English over Japanese.



## Japanese Cultural Education

La Union provides a class entitled *cultura japonesa* [Japanese culture]. This class does not follow any particular textbook; instead, the Japanese language instructors plan the lessons themselves. Examples of lesson plans include origami, Japanese nursery rhymes, such as *oki na kuri no ki no shita de* [under the spreading chestnut tree], *donguri korokoro* [rolling rolling acorns], Japanese folk tales, and manga. In some lessons, the teachers will educate students about certain annual festivals, such as *tanabata* [star festival], *kodomo no hi* [children's day], and *hina matsuri* [dolls festival], and organize activities that are based on the festival; although, the range of activities is limited. For example, to mark *tanabata*, students will write down their wishes on small cards and attach them to bamboo leaves.

La Union also organizes extra-curricular Japanese cultural activities that the school participates in as a whole. Examples include radio calisthenics, exhibitions featuring the work students have completed to mark festivals, selling of bento lunchboxes in the school shop (these are sold under the name "OBENTO," but the contents of the lunchboxes differ considerably from the classic Japanese bento), and the holding of sports days once a year.

## Nikkei Schools in Lima: La Victoria

Like La Union, La Victoria is a private school founded on Christian values. In 2012, the school was moved to a location alongside a quiet street. All the classrooms have a simple concrete floor, but unlike the old prefab schoolhouse that the author visited in August 2011, the classrooms have large windows overlooking the courtyard, creating a bright and spacious atmosphere. If you step into the corridor from any of

the classrooms in this three-storied school, you can see the blue sky and the courtyard, which also serves as the location of morning assembly.

The following paragraph describes the characteristics of the La Victoria that the author gleaned from conducting participant observation during the school's morning assembly, which is held every Monday.

At 7:30, the students and teachers arrive at the school in their designated uniforms and assemble in the courtyard. At this point, the author noticed a large hanging banner on part of the front wall of the school displaying the name of the school and the Japanese characters "Kon ki" together with the Spanish translation "*perseverancia*" [perseverance]. After the students of each year's group form separate lines demarcating boys from girls, the morning worship begins with the Lord's Prayer. The prayer begins with the words "Our Father," ends in "Amen," and the entire prayer is recited in Spanish. Then, after the group of students who hoisted the flag of Peru have filed into the venue in time with the music, the entire school begins to sing the national anthem. Once the anthem has ended, the words "Viva el Perú" [long live Peru] are called out and the words are repeated by all of the students. The students are then ordered to stand at attention, and the music system starts playing the melody of "Kimigayo", the national anthem of Japan. The students are requested to sing in Japanese, but the volume of the chorus is considerably lower than it was during the Peruvian national anthem. Similarly to before, the students are prompted to say the Spanish words "Viva el Japón", and this concludes the weekly morning assembly. With the morning assembly over, the focus shifts to the topic of the day; in this case it was an announcement about waterworks week.

Incidentally, the frequently repeated "stand to attention" orders in Spanish and the teachers' close monitoring of the assembled students, particularly the lower years, to make sure they were standing with arms by their sides, is a phenomenon that is by no means exclusive to Nikkei schools; it can also be observed in other schools in Peru. However, a characteristic not observed in other schools is the singing of "Kimigayo" and the repeating of "Viva el Japón." Another notable characteristic, albeit one that does not take place every week, is the holding of an award ceremony in front of the assembled students for those students who passed

the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. Regarding the former, there is some room for debate as to whether it has any significance to students beyond being a mere convention. As for the latter, though, it does at the very least serve to motivate students to study Japanese.

## Proportion of Nikkei Students

In 2011, there were about 300 students. In the following year of 2012, this increased to about 350. Nikkei students make up about 60% of this total. While La Victoria is smaller in scale than La Union, it has a greater proportion of Nikkei students. Leaving aside Japanese schools, La Victoria is one of the very few schools that still have a majority of Nikkei students in Lima (according to the listening survey conducted at La Victoria, the proportion of Nikkei students in both the *José Gálvez School* and the *Hideyo Noguchi School* is less than 20%).

*La Victoria also serves as an important receptacle for returnees. One staff member at the school said, “The number of Nikkei Peruvians returning from Japan has been on the increase for some years now. In the past there used to be one or two returning every year. Now there’s many more.”*

*However, the classes for the younger years (other than Japanese classes), including Spanish classes and mathematics classes, are taught in Spanish. Accordingly, those students who are better at Japanese than Spanish, whether they are Nikkei or not, will have difficulty understanding a mathematics teacher who cannot speak Japanese at all. Even if Spanish is mastered smoothly as a “context-embedded language” for everyday situations, as defined by Ota (1996, 128–131), most students will need a lot of time to master the “context-reduced language” of the classroom, and there are concerns that this will negatively impact other school activities.*

## Japanese Language Teaching

There were about 40 teaching staff, including four Japanese language instructors. One of these was a Japanese national who, despite living in Peru for a long time, is currently learning Spanish on a basic level in the lower year Spanish class. The other three are Nikkei Peruvians. Their first language is

Spanish, and they have lived in Japan for a lengthy period of 5–20 years.

English and Japanese classes are both allotted four time slots. Regarding the learning content of the Japanese classes, during the first three primary years, students are taught the hiragana and katakana syllabaries and some basic Japanese phrases using the blackboard and tables attached to the classroom walls. From the fourth to sixth years, the students learn more advanced Japanese using the textbooks “*Kodomo no Nihongo*” [Japanese for Children] and “*Minna no Nihongo*” in secondary education.

Let us take a look at a scene at the lowest level of the Japanese classes, the “beginners’ class,” which is attended by a mixture of first and second year primary students. There are eleven students in the class, and aside from one student who has a double nationality, they all have Peruvian nationality. Four of these students were born in Japan, and five of the remaining students have lived in Japan for various periods. However, the students all converse with each other in Spanish. The author also observed students who had problems transcribing Japanese, and students who, when asked “*dare desu ka?* [who is it?],” misheard the “*da*” syllable as “*za*” and therefore had trouble responding.

A class that was in stark contrast in terms of use of Japanese was the “returnees’ class”, which was taught by a Japanese national. Established as a provisional class, the returnees’ class is attended for one or two academic terms, after which the students join regular classes. Due to their father’s work situation, some of the students leave for Japan once again before completing the class. In this class, Spanish is seldom heard, and the students learn kanji character-based expressions and other content in Japanese.

In the “advanced class”, the author did observe students switching back and forth between Spanish and Japanese depending on the language spoken by the other person, but this does not mean that there were many bilingual students with a perfect balance of Japanese and Spanish. There were some students who were born in Japan to non-Nikkei Peruvian parents and had spent more time in Japan than in Peru, meaning that they remained more proficient in Japanese, similar to the students in the returnees’ class. The Japanese words they use, such as *cho umai* [very good], and their inter-

ests, such as the pop group Arashi, are no different from their peers in Japan. There are also a considerable number of students who, while retaining their Peruvian nationality, started learning Japanese in Japan, and then returned to Peru midway through the term, where upon they started learning Spanish. The hardships these students faced in going through this experience mirrored that of the class's young teacher. This situation probably explains why, as the teacher said, "The returnees stick to themselves." However, schools are supposed to narrow the distance between students who have different languages and cultures.

### Japanese Cultural Education

In addition to the Japanese language classes, La Victoria allots one timeslot a week to "Japanese culture", which is a compulsory class. Rather than using any particular textbooks, the teachers occasionally distribute printouts to the class, and provide instruction in Japanese cultural activities, such as origami and Japanese dances. A number of teachers mentioned that, though they may wish to use textbooks published in Japan, they are "very expensive" compared to Peruvian prices. The price factor renders it difficult to acquire teaching materials for Japanese culture, and therefore it restricts the teaching content.

Japanese cultural education is not restricted to the "Japanese culture" class. Even in the "Japanese language" classes mentioned earlier, non-verbal messages that are particular to Japanese culture, such as bowing, are actively used. For example, students rise when given the Japanese instruction of *tatte kudasai* [please stand], and they are expected to bow together with the teacher and utter greetings in Japanese, such as *ohayo gozaimasu* [good morning] and *yoroshiku onegaishimasu* (a general expression of good will—there is no exact English translation).

In addition, to mark the Japanese national holiday *bunka no hi* [Culture Day], origami and cooking classes are held during the week in which the day falls. There is also a sports day held once a year in which all the students take part. The students are divided into two teams, red and white, which compete against each other. Like La Union, there is a shop in the school that sells "Obento".

### Conclusion

In Peruvian society, the words associated with Japanese people are "perseverance", "patience", "courtesy", and "studiousness", and the words associated with Japanese society are "science and technology", "clean", and "safe". This indicates that in Peru, Japan is generally represented with positive language. The positive image associated with the Nikkei Peruvians and the Japanese has also been utilized by Nikkei Peruvian politicians for their political advantage.

This paper examined as case studies two private schools in Lima. These case studies confirmed that the schools were trying to transmit the Japanese ethos, which as we have seen is highly regarded in Peru, by such means as teaching the way Japanese people greet one another (bowing etc.), introducing people to Japanese calendar events, and helping people learn Japanese.

However, it was also revealed that even in Peru's key Nikkei schools, English teaching is prioritized over Japanese teaching in order to meet the demands of the international community.

To promote the Japanese language and culture, it is surely necessary to consider who is playing the role of the transmitter. The examples of the two Lima schools revealed that it is the Nikkei Peruvians that play the central role in transmitting the Japanese language and culture in Peru, as teachers. At the same time, these examples also revealed the important transmitter role played by non-Nikkei Peruvians, not only as teachers, but as students as well.

In the Spanish-speaking nation of Peru, both Nikkei Peruvians and non-Nikkei Peruvians can be expected to play an increasingly important role as transmitters of the Japanese language and culture. What will prove problematic, however, is the fact that the cultural gateway remains unopened, as it were, thanks to the insularity of the Japanese nation, which does not easily accept "gaikokujin" (foreigners), including Peruvians—Nikkei or otherwise. Japanese language instructors and individuals interested in Japanese culture should be given more opportunities to obtain scholarships and study in Japan.

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